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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet discusses the original rationale for university systems, points out some of the problems existing because of the definition of that rationale, and proposes a new responsibility for university systems and a new challenge for their leaders. The pamphlet affirms that the system chief executive officer (CEO) and board of governors are internal to the university, refuting the widespread view that they are external to the campuses and constitute state control. The CEO of a university system has three sets of responsibilities: nurturing, leading, and managing. A fundamental problem in most systems is a dissonance between the official allocation of authority expressed in the policy manual or table of organization and the actual practices and procedures that have evolved. Problems inherent in the CEO's role are a foggy identity, a lack of constituency, the requirement to observe ceremony and protocol, and the problem of having to assert and re-assert legitimacy. New challenges include: (1) the provision of a social and moral vision; (2) the rapid and continual change in technology; (3) the environment; and (4) the range of international obligations. (JDD)

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Monograph Series

Number 1

Old Problems and New Responsibilities for University System Heads

Lawrence K. Pettit

Adapted from Keynote Remarks given at the Annual Meeting of the Pennsylvania Association of Councils of Trustees, Hershey, Pennsylvania, April 6, 1989

National Association of System Heads

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I.

CLARK KERR WROTE some years ago that more than one half of all the students in the United States are on campuses that are parts of systems, and approximately one half of all public campuses are constituent parts of systems.[1] This has been true for a long time, yet there still is little public understanding of systems. Until very recently, national organizations in arranging programs for their meetings, and observers in writing on the topic, conceptualized American higher education as though every campus had its own governing board, to which the campus president reported directly. Few have written knowledgeably about system chancellors or presidents at all, yet often these are the men and women in whom the real executive power of universities is vested.

Public higher education these days exists in a highly charged political environment where there are many contravening claims on the public purse. Standing at the nexus in that political mine field where academia and politics intersect are the chief executive officers who report directly to governing boards, and whose job includes trying to manage relationships between academia and government. To borrow from Thomas Hobbes, it can be a difficult, nasty, brutish and often short job.

I shall talk tonight of the original rationale for university systems, point out some of the problems that have existed because of the definition of that rationale, and then propose what I regard as a *new* responsibility for university systems and a new challenge for their leaders.

During the decade of rapid expansion in American higher education—roughly the 1960s—most

observers agreed that there ought to be university systems because it would be less cumbersome and more cost effective than if every public university had its own governing board. Most states chose to rely on university systems to bring about inter-institutional cooperation, disperse program availability, and enrich curricula without costly duplication. Few were willing to challenge the notion that complementary missions and program development under system direction should help to achieve state and regional objectives in the most efficient and cost-effective manner. Educators understood, moreover, that by making management decisions within systems we would keep government from setting educational priorities and micro-managing the campuses from the state capitol. We knew it would be better to have those decisions buffered by the system than to let every campus sit exposed, by itself, with the long-arm of state government intruding into campus management. Government's aim was served as well, though, in that a system with a single chief executive officer could more adequately complete the requirements of accountability to the people of the state and their state government, and also could represent the interests of higher education in the state capitol, reducing the cacophony of every campus president descending on the legislature to plead his special case.

But because the accountability and representational aspects of the position were so highly visible, it became widely assumed that the *only* legitimate role for system chief executive officers was to provide staff support to the board and lobby at the state capitol. In other words, the job was mistakenly construed from the campus and public perspectives as a chief of staff rather than a chief executive officer. In many cases, consequently, it has been difficult for the system CEO to establish and communicate the legitimacy with which he exercises his rightful executive line authority over campus presidents on so-called "campus matters."[2]

One should view a university system as a single organization with constituent parts, with legal authority vested in its governing board, and with a single chief executive officer heading the administration. As the leadership of the organization, the system CEO and the board clearly are *internal* to the university. A conventional and erroneous view is that the system office and the governing board are *external* to the campuses, and that they constitute *external* (or *state*) regulation and control in the same manner as a statewide coordinating board. That notion is legally fallacious and organizationally unsound. Unfortunately, it is widespread.

Let me interject here something that we take for granted, but nonetheless something that merits frequent re-stating: it is important to remember the *purpose* of a university system. It is inappropriate to talk about power or authority relationships without keeping our eye on the purpose which we all serve: to create, transmit, and use knowledge. It has to be the primary objective of the governing board and of the system chief executive officer to create and sustain both the internal and external conditions that allow the campuses to achieve their missions. That is always the foremost objective, and we need to keep it in mind as we administer university systems.

In fulfilling that purpose, the chief executive officer of a university system has three sets of responsibilities, all of which imply a corresponding authority to discharge them. I call these *nurturing, leading* and *managing*.

The *nurturing* function is that of promoting academic values in general and the particular norms and values of the individual campuses within the system. It includes, as well, providing and supporting flexibility necessary for the campuses to achieve their missions effectively. Finally, nurturing requires promoting diversity within a system while guarding the uniqueness of each institution, and remaining attentive to the needs of the campuses while serving as a conduit for the expression of their views to the board and to

other important groups and individuals.

A second set of responsibilities are *leadership* functions. The system CEO has to provide for the campuses a unified and coherent presence in the region, state and nation. He or she has to shape the development of a culture for the system as a whole, that enables it to establish priorities, articulate a purpose, and plan for the future. The system CEO has to maintain liaison with political, governmental, philanthropic, and business organizations on behalf of system objectives and campus development. He must clarify for others the missions and aspirations of the campuses and create shared meanings within the system as well. She or he must provide adequate vision for charting new directions for the system and its campuses, and must coordinate and direct strategic planning at the system level for the complementary, rather than competitive, development of the campuses.

Finally, the third set of responsibilities are *management* functions. These are inescapable, even though we like to say that "operations" are delegated to *campus* executives. It is the *system* chief executive who is held accountable by the public, the legislature, and the governing board for what takes place on campuses throughout the system. Accordingly, he or she has legitimate management oversight functions: discharging administratively the legal responsibilities of the board, meeting the collective and individual accountability of the campuses to the state, interpreting and implementing board policy, and overseeing (while not being directly involved in) the general management of the campuses.

One would think that by now these functions—and prerogatives—of the system executive would be taken for granted as the *sine qua non* of his empowerment to promote the best interests of the campuses. But both the academic culture and the system structure carry the seeds of tension and resistance to central authority; some system executives, therefore, must work continually at re-establishing the prerogatives of office.

We need to consider some of the problems that often occur in the relationship between the central administration (or what might be called the "system office") and the campus. Clark Kerr in the 1984 work I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks put it as clearly as one can when he said the governance of systems is one of really sore points in American higher education; a few systems, he said, seem to exist on the verge of explosion.[3]

A fundamental problem in most systems is a dissonance between the official allocation of authority expressed in the policy manual or the table of organization, and the actual practices and procedures that have evolved over time. Practices acquire legitimacy as they are repeated in annual routines, even if they are contrary to stated policy. To a large extent, as Joseph Kaufmann points out, the real authority relationships in a system will be defined by the style of the early incumbents, rather than by what is written officially.[4] A system CEO who avoids controversy by giving away or letting atrophy his official powers and prerogatives is weaving a strait jacket of expectations for his successors. When there is a lack of agreement between the practices on one hand and the official prescriptions on the other, it is up to the *governing board* to clarify its expectations and reduce the ambiguity. Otherwise it is unreasonable to expect outstanding performance from either system or campus executives.

II.

LET US CONSIDER some of the problems that inhere in the system CEO's role. The first is a foggy *identity*. People associate what they know about higher education with what goes on at the campus (academic programs, athletics, cultural events, social events, etc.). A *campus* president or chan-

cellor is automatically identified with the institution, and there is a widespread acceptance of his or her leadership role in society. It is not that easy for the system chancellor or president. The system itself is an abstraction in the public mind. People have loyalty to an institution but not to a system. Most people do not understand where the system executive belongs in the scheme of things. It is rather awkward for one to keep defining his position and authority over and over again as he deals with different publics, but most system CEOs must do so.

A second (and related) problem is lack of *constituency*. In the end, the system head really has no constituency other than his board. A campus president has the local students, faculty, alumni, townspeople, local newspapers, local legislators, local boosters, all of whom can be mobilized when the campus is threatened or perceived as being threatened (sometimes by imputed actions of the system CEO or the governing board). Ideally, the various campus constituency alliances ought to be accessible to the system president as he or she builds coalitions in support of the system or of higher education generally. It does not happen easily, however. Usually, the system CEO has nothing like that kind of broad support, and in addition does not have the luxury of acting as the unrestrained advocate of a single institution. Rather, he or she has to balance within the system the competing aims and aspirations of the various constituent campuses, satisfying none of them completely. As a consequence, it is almost impossible for the system CEO to inspire any loyalty, even though he may command respect and carry official authority with him.

The identity and constituency problems can be illustrated together by reference to one of my previous experiences as a system head. As chancellor and chief executive officer, I was the single spokesman for the system at the legislature. I presented our appropriations testimony and fielded questions. Campus presidents sat

silently in the first row of the audience. By longstanding habit that preceeded my chancellorship, reporters for newspapers in the campus communities would patiently ignore the testimony and questioning, and then rush to interview the campus presidents afterward—for a "local angle" to their stories. There was no easy way, therefore, that the faculties or the public could know of this aspect of the chancellor's role. And clearly the chancellor could establish no public identity with the interests or aspirations of the campuses. Moreover, since the chancellor's executive responsibility was systemwide rather than parochial, he presumably had no particular constituency interested in his remarks.

A third set of problems relates to *ceremony* and *protocol*. It is difficult sometimes to determine what role the system chief executive officer ought to play in ceremonial events on a campus, such as commencements. If the system president or chancellor happens to live in the community of one of the campuses, the question of who presides in the box at football games can become a burning one, as it has in some locations. When the system head and a campus executive appear at the same event, it is important that the system executive *require* a role that underscores the fact that he is the head of administration for the organization, and that he or she not be treated as a messenger who merely extends greetings from the board, or as simply a visiting dignitary seated with other VIPS off stage. [On the other hand, the system president should be quite selective in the events he attends, leaving the stage on most occasions to the campus executive.]

A residual problem that results from all of these discussed is the problem of *legitimacy*. It is a continuing and awkward problem for some system presidents to have to assert and re-assert legitimacy because it is not automatically accorded them the way it is a campus president. *If the identity is foggy, the constituency uncertain or lacking, if the right protocols are not observed, and if the ceremonial trappings of office are*

withheld, then the exercise of authority may very well not be widely accepted as appropriate. It is little wonder that the dominant perspective on many campuses, unfortunately, is that the system CEO does not have legitimate executive authority affecting the campus, but should be confined to lobbying in the state capital and performing clerical duties for the board. This view is not easily overcome by appeals to reason or logic, or by reference to the board policy manual, because it is a view sustainable by the academy's natural and traditional impulse toward anarchy and autonomy.

The relationship between the system CEO and the campus executive is a delicate one. It is somewhat like a marriage. It has to be worked at continuously. Sometimes goodwill is not enough. There have to be shared objectives and there have to be shared perspectives. All of the executive officers—system head and campus heads—have to buy into a set of aspirations and objectives for the system as a whole in order for the system arrangement to work. And even when that is done, sometimes there are problems at a level of administration below the president and the chancellor. While the system chancellor and the campus presidents may work very well together, system staff may tend to push the chancellor too hard to be authoritarian in his relationships with the campuses. Clearly, some system staff, having felt humiliated and mistreated over the years by campus administrators and faculty, develop cynical and hostile attitudes toward the campuses. It is commonplace also that second, third, and fourth echelon administrators on the campuses, not understanding or not wanting to understand the line relationship, view the campus president and system chancellor as administrative equals who are locked in competition with each other. These administrators view their job as to support the campus executive in his competition with the system executive. In such cases it becomes very difficult to get campus administrators to be responsive even to simple

information requests from the central office.

There is an interesting passage in an extraordinary book, *The Emperor of China*, by Jonathan Spence, an historian at Yale. It is based upon the diaries of Kang-hsi, who was Emperor of China from 1661 to 1722. If one thinks of the Emperor here as analogous to the system CEO, the generals as similar to campus executives, and the officers of the army as second and third echelon campus administrators, I think one can see that in the China of 1680 there were problems similar to what we face today in American higher education. The Emperor wrote:

> A court audience has the important function of reducing arrogance. Naturally one can't summon all military governors for audiences at the same time, but regular audiences are crucial with military men, especially when they have held power a long time . . . *Army officers on the frontiers tend to obey only their own commander, acknowledging him as the ruler. Once, when I sent an edict to General Ma Ch'eng-yin, and he obediently knelt to receive it, his subordinate officers all said, 'Does our general kneel to others?'* After hearing this, I resolved never to allow too long a tenure of military power.[5] [emphasis added]

Sometimes it is the taunt, or the fear of the taunt, "does our general kneel to others," that may inhibit maximum cooperation from the campus to the central administration. Perhaps all system presidents or chancellors should take note of the Emperor's admonition "never to allow too long a tenure" in *campus* power. At the very least, emblazened on the wall of every system head's office might well be the motto, *"Summa sedes non capit duos."*[6]

III.

WHILE SYSTEM HEADS continue to struggle with their original problem of uncertain legitimate authority in the face of impossible responsibilities, there is emerging a new set of tasks in the public arena, and correspondingly a new opportunity for system leadership. Changes in the political environments at both the state and federal levels, coupled with the persistence of social problems that threaten civic stability and economic productivity, impel higher education, and especially system leaders, to assume a new role in public life.

Within most of the states there has been a shift in focus on the part of legislators, governors, and state coordinating boards and agencies, from a concentration on regulation to a concern for broad policy questions. If the regulatory reins on the fiscal management of our enterprise are eased, there will be new expectations (and new tethers) that higher education re-shape its programs and reallocate its resources in order to be a helpful partner in addressing and solving social problems. The earlier, economic development burden that higher education assumed will not suffice to enable us to beg off from this new responsibility.

Simultaneously, at the federal level, there is a dramatic change in the style of politics, one that has, in fact, forced the states to assume leadership on important matters of domestic policy. The age of instant polling and the age of television have changed the manner of federal elections so that candidates, doing what they have to do in order to get elected and re-elected, are rendered almost ineffectual as office holders.

There is a consequent *immobilism* in the federal government as regards major issues. As Hedrick Smith has observed, television is a "major revolutionary ingredient in the new power mix."

Television marketing techniques in political campaigns, Smith says, fuel the independence of individual politicians, enabling them to "build their personal mass appeal and political organizations, bypassing the regular party apparatus."[7] Politicians, as a result, do not lead opinion on tough policy issues, but instead clamor for attention in their efforts to reflect on the air the uninformed public impulses of the moment as captured through incessant polling. Smith cites the 1984 Reagan campaign as "a triumph of the modern political game," epitomizing "the disconnect between campaigning and governing." After the election, the President lacked a clear policy mandate because his "soothing re-election refrain" was devoid of policy discussion. Smith quotes Richard Nixon in remarks the former President made six years after leaving the White House: "Television is a show-business medium—more often than not, what is emotionally appealing—and therefore dramatically captivating—is intellectually vacuous and substantively wrong. What makes good television often makes bad policy."[8]

Furthermore, the costs of television marketing, and the related costs of political consultants and pollsters, make candidates reliant on financial contributions from a bewildering array of political action groups (PACs). Obviously the poor, who inhabit the inner cities and rural backwaters, and whose needs society desperately needs to address, cannot afford to buy into the game, and are, accordingly, disenfranchised.

In our country the leaders of higher education are going to have to fill a very troublesome vacuum. Not only administrators, but board members as well must supply conscience for the body politic. One of the few early voices in this regard is that of Paul Ylvisaker, who at the Association of Governing Boards 1989 Annual meeting said the primary requirements of higher education in our time are to focus on creativity and to *provide social and moral vision*. He warned of swift and radical changes as we confront the major issues

of our time, among them ozone depletion and environmental degradation generally, and the wastage of human beings in our society.

As higher education begins to mobilize and orchestrate its talents to speak with some kind of moral vision and social purpose, as we must, those who represent broad coalitions within the states must join the leaders of our national associations in assuming this responsibility. Most public university campuses presumably will enlist in the war against the social problems of this country and will address policy questions at the state level, but it is only the most notable of single institutions (public and private), the Harvards, the Stanfords, the Michigans, that are likely on their own to play a major role in the national political dialogue. Primarily it is those who head systems who must be out front on important state policy questions, and who must help fill the vacuum in moral leadership at the federal level. Such responsibility is a logical extension of the system head's prerogative as higher education spokesman in the state and national political systems.

Consider some of the demographic realities and economic problems that the country faces and that higher education must address. In a 1985 report, the Education Commission of the States pointed to some startling statistics, which probably are worse by now because in the meantime we have not done much about them. The proportion of children in this country who live in poverty was up from 16% in 1970 to 22% in 1985. About 14 million children, in 1985, lived in poverty. Almost half of the black children and one third of the Hispanic children in this country live in poverty. Drug and alcohol abuse was up sixty-fold from 1960 to 1985; teenage pregnancy was up 109% for whites, 10% for non-whites; the proportion of mothers who are unmarried is up from less than 1% in 1980 to over 6% today; female heads of households were up from 12% of the total in 1970 to 23% in 1984; teenage homicide was up during that period more than

200% for whites, 16% for non-whites; teenage suicide has increased more than 150% since 1950; teenage criminal arrests were up from 18% of the total in 1960 to 34% in 1980; teenage unemployment went up 35% for non-whites, 60% for whites between 1961 and 1985.

There are those who would say that by insensitivity and neglect we are brutalizing our children in this country. Yet nearly everyone recognizes that the nation's economic strength and its social cohesion will depend on how well we develop our human resources. The National Academy of Engineering last year pointed out that in today's world investment in *intellectual* capital is an option with the highest return. But intellectual capital is like every other form of capital, it appreciates and depreciates and becomes obsolete, requires maintenance, repair, replacement, and modernization. New infusions are required from time to time. Venture capitalists are needed, new sources must be discovered and existing sources must be expanded. We are in a new kind of global economy where human talent, knowledge and information are the new forms of capital. Yet we continue to waste our human capital at an alarming rate.

To build a just and competitive society we have to begin from the very beginning of human life. By now it is recognizably urgent that this country focus its first priority and its resources on such things as prenatal care, early childhood nutrition, and preschool programs, and that the resolve to nurture human talent extend all the way through graduate school.

Many children in this country live in the most degrading circumstances, and even those who do not may live with a confusing lack of stability. The United States has become a very mobile society. For example, approximately half of all children between the ages of 5 and 14 changed their residency between 1975 and 1980. In 1955, 60% of the nation's households conformed to the conventional set of roles, with a male bread winner, a stay-at-home housewife, and two chil-

dren. By 1986, only 4% of American families fit that model. Wealth has shifted location as well, and poverty has moved from the elderly end to the young end of the spectrum. In 1970 an elderly person was more likely to be poor than a very young person. Today, a child is nearly *six times* as likely to be living in poverty as are his or her grandparents. Yet in 1983, the 11% of the population that was elderly received 51% of all government spending on social welfare programs.

While the number of young adults in the population is declining, the at-risk segment of that population is growing, and businesses are increasingly forced to dip into the "at-risk" segment of the entry-level youth employment pool. If one takes into account both the high school drop outs and those who graduate from high school without fundamental skills, we are adding to the work force each year about 1.7 million persons who are functionally illiterate. By 1990, in addition, one of every five entrants into the work force will be a minority youth. At present, there are about 17 workers for each retired person. By the year 2015, there will be only three workers for each retired person, and at least one of those three will be minority. Given that datum, we should view the racial and ethnic disparities in college attendance and graduation with alarm. While the high school graduation rates for blacks and Hispanics has improved over the last 20 years, their college attendance and their college completion rates have actually declined since 1971. Sixty-one percent of white youth entering college eventually earn a degree, but only thirty-two percent of Mexican Americans, twenty-eight percent of Puerto Ricans, and twenty-four percent of blacks who enter college actually finish.

Surely cultural diversity, both as a treasured social characteristic and a source of profound social problems, must be on the priority list of policy questions for national and state decision-makers, and also for university system heads and their boards.

A second issue that higher education will have

to address is the rapid and continual change in technology, especially in such fields as semiconductivity, supercomputing, high definition television, biotechnology and telecommunications. While technological developments may lead to reduced production costs for business, the need to maintain technology for research, and for instructional and administrative currency may *increase* costs for colleges and universities, and eventually could price some institutions out of the game. System administrations are the logical sites for the development of new models of networking aimed at spreading technological advantages and sharing costs.

Science, technology and creativity are the wellspring of our national competitiveness. The magazine, *Inc.,* in 1987 pointed out a change in business strategy, as follows: "A quarter century ago, companies looked for cheap labor, cheap power, and good transportation. Physical infrastructure was the key. Today, companies look for educated workers, excellent universities, entrepreneurial climates, and an attractive quality of life. Good roads and airports are still important, but *intellectual* infrastructure is the key."

In efforts to strengthen our nation's intellectual infrastructure, university systems and their leadership will have to become increasingly concerned with federal research policy and with shaping state aspirations and priorities. As a prudent investment in the nation's future, the Federal government should provide support for widespread upgrading of higher education's scientific equipment and instrumentation. At the state level it is almost impossible to chart goals and objectives for public higher education in the absence of some articulated and more general *state* priorities and aspirations. States that have not already determined strategically where they want to go and what role their state universities will play in getting them there have left themselves at a competitive disadvantage.

A third issue is the environment. It is interesting to note that in the 1960s and '70s environ-

mental issues were advanced essentially by anti-establishment activitists. Then in the 1980s there seemed to be *nobody* championing environmental causes. This was a period of terrible neglect of such commonweal issues as the self-regarding *raison d'etre* of the Reagan revolution was amply fulfilled. Now, because of the imminent and no longer deniable danger to all of us, environmental concern has become a mainstream issue. While in the '60s and '70s these concerns were expressed primarily by students and faculty, now they are going to have to be part of the agenda of university leadership whose spokesmen must provide moral leadership as well as enlisting academic expertise in exploring policy and scientific solutions to the problems of global degradation.

As a fourth concern, let us confront once more what officially we have asserted at least since the Treaty of Versailles: *we do live in a world more encompassing than the United States.* Universities have an important role in educating an increasing number of foreign students, maintaining a network of well-placed international alumni, providing expertise to strengthen American interests in global economics and politics, and in educating our own people toward their being enlightened, tolerant and effective world citizens. The full range of international obligations may be too burdensome for most institutions to bear singly, and system leadership will face new challenges in an effort to work out models of cooperation and networking. Just as system heads have controlled the state relations of their constituent institutions, and have at least coordinated their Federal relations, one can foresee their assuming a larger role in arranging and coordinating campus and systemwide international liaisons.

. . .

SYSTEM CEOS and their boards have an inescapable role in mediating between higher education and the larger society, and in providing moral leadership in the confrontation of national and state policy issues. Representation of higher education in the national policy arena will and should continue to be performed by the associations at Washington's Number One Dupont Circle, but those who speak and act toward shaping the policy agenda should increasingly include additional spokesmen for coalitions, primarily university systems. At the state level, system chancellors and presidents continue to be the generally acknowledged higher education spokesmen on policy matters. Their view is broader than that of any individual academic discipline, or of any particular institution, and they are the appropriate representatives of higher education in larger statewide coalitions designed to suggest or influence public policy.

The new policy responsibility of university systems should enlarge the public role of system heads. To the original activity of defending appropriations proposals, meeting accountability requirements and seeking program approvals will be added a new dimension: participation in broad coalitions of civic leaders in shaping policy agenda. But the new responsibility is inextricably linked to the old problems. In order for system CEOs to be effective in this new responsibility, their executive authority must be accepted as legitimate and fully supported by their boards and the various campus constituencies. One should hope that very soon all public university systems in the United States will have reached a level of maturity in which the puerile issues attendant to the old problems will have been resolved, and that system presidents and chancellors, as a consequence, may be effective leaders as higher education enters into a new form of relationship with the larger society.

NOTES

[1]Clark Kerr, *Presidents Make a Difference: Strengthening Leadership in Colleges and Universities* (Washington: Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities, 1984).

[2]There are some systems in which the executive officer position was deliberately designed to function as chief of staff. In such cases the title usually is "executive secretary" or "executive director." Today such systems are a minority, and the comments here apply to the more prevalent system arrangement in which the system executive has the title "president" or "chancellor," and functions as a CEO.

[3]Kerr, *op. cit.*

[4]Joseph F. Kauffman, *At the Pleasure of the Board: The Service of the College or University President* (Washington: American Council on Education, 1980).

[5]Jonathan D. Spence, *The Emperor of China: Self Portrait of Kang-hsi* (New York: Knopf, 1974).

[6]Literally "The highest seat does not hold two," or "There's room for only one at the top."

[7]Hedrick Smith, *The Power Game: How Washington Works* (New York: Random House, 1988).

[8]Quoted in Smith, *op. cit.*